

Setting Goals to Change Behavior – Four Steps for Helping Your Patients Succeed

Helping patients achieve goals can sometimes seem like searching for the Holy Grail or the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but the reality is that it does not have to be so difficult. We, like our patients, may be expecting too much from ourselves, so let's take a step back and review the basics of setting effective goals.

Step 1: Assess. Ask open ended questions.

In a rushed healthcare environment, we often ask questions that require a yes or no answer rather than ask opened-ended questions in order to save time. But to truly find out what our patients are thinking, it is important to ask them questions that may require more than a one-syllable answer. Some good opening questions are: What brings you here today? What are some of your concerns about your diabetes? What do you understand about diabetes? What is your biggest struggle? What are your goals? What frustrates you the most? How can I help you?

You will learn a lot about your patient in a very short amount of time if you let him or her talk.

Step 2: Focus. Aim for realistic targets.

Patients often know what they want; they may say to you: “I don't want to get complications.” “I don't want to gain more weight.” “I want to lose weight.” or “I want my A1C below 7.” These are all admirable goals but they are probably set at too high a level. In addition, they are more about the “outcome” and not the steps that the patient can take to achieve their goals. Too often, a goal becomes more focused on achieving a particular number or target, such as a specific number of pounds lost or a specific drop in an A1C number, rather than the actions needed to improve health or quality of life. Therefore, the educator's role is to help discuss both a realistic target outcome (such as weight or A1C) as well as those behaviors needed to help reach that target (such as eating less, being more active or taking medicines as prescribed).

Step 3: Plan. Get specific. Set SMART goals.

So how do you go about helping your patients set goals that are more behaviorally-focused and achievable? Try using the concept of SMART goal setting. **SMART** is an acronym that stands for the following:

- **Specific:** focused on one particular behavior
- **Measurable:** so you can tell whether or not the goal has been met
- **Achievable:** so you can measure accomplishments and progress
- **Realistic:** something that your patient feels is truly doable
- **Timely:** an established timeframe in which to accomplish the goal

Whenever your patient is in doubt about a particular goal, suggest that she ask herself, “Is this a SMART goal?” If she can’t answer “yes” to whether the goal is specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely, then the answer is decidedly “no!”

The following are some examples of typical goals that patients set. After reading each goal, ask yourself if it’s a SMART goal. If not, how might you reframe it to make SMART?

Patient Goal #1: “I want to lose 50 pounds.”

SMART? No. This goal is not really a goal, but rather, an outcome of practicing healthy behaviors, such as eating less or exercising more.

Educator Reframing: “That’s an excellent long term goal, but let’s think about a shorter-term goal that focuses on what you’ll actually do to lose the weight.”

New Goal: For the next two weeks, I will snack on three cups of light microwave popcorn instead of the usual bag of potato chips if I want a snack in the evening.

Patient Goal #2: “For the next month, I will start walking for 20 minutes every day after dinner.

SMART? Yes. This goal meets all the criteria for a SMART goal.

Patient Goal #3: “I would like to get my fasting blood glucose less than 140.”

SMART? No. This goal is outcome-focused, much like the weight-loss goal, above. And it doesn’t indicate how the patient will lower their blood glucose or in what time-frame.

Educator Reframing: “How do you think you might work towards lowering your fasting blood glucose? What’s one step you can start working on now that can get you headed in the right direction?”

New Goal: I will check my blood glucose four times a day (before meals and at bedtime) for the next two weeks and call my educator if any of my readings are above 180 for three days in a row.

Step 4: Do. And keeping doing it! Change the goal if it’s not working.

Reassess how the patient is doing with their goal at their next visit. Schedule an appointment or a quick phone call specifically just to talk about the patient’s goals and how he or she did. Once again, ask open-ended questions to elicit feedback on their progress and any barriers they’ve been facing. What got in their way? What worked? How would they change things next time? Congratulate them for any improvement, even if they did not reach their target. Any change is worth recognizing. Reassure them that change takes time and that it is an ongoing process, as illustrated in the diagram below. Use the companion goal setting sheet with patients to help focus them on what they want to work on, when they will do it, how they will do it and how they will know if it’s

working. Teach patients about SMART goals, reinforcing the importance of being specific and realistic. They'll quickly catch on and will feel empowered by the small but significant changes that they make.

Coaching and helping our patients are two of our most challenging yet most rewarding tasks. Small accomplishments with a lot of encouragement can lead to huge successes. Help your patients (and yourself) realize that success doesn't happen overnight.

